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THE SABBATH LIGHT.¹

NARRATIVES of successive and connected events are either scientific, religious or legendary. Scientific when reporting facts supported by evidence ; religious or dogmatic when the professors of a creed are asked to believe them in the interests of their creed ; legendary when the narratives are preserved in a people's memory, generation after generation, and no demand is made on universal acceptance.

The memorials raised to the past are likewise of a three-fold character ; according to the class of historical subject they are intended to figure. For it is not only the dogmatic narrative that is utilised by religion ; the mythical and historical forms are also pressed into its service. A religious memorial may even be built up out of various historical elements intimately blended.

The Lights associated with Chanukah, for example, perpetuate a historical fact—the Maccabean victory over the Syro-Greeks. They recall, at the same time, a popular legend—the miracle of the flask of oil. The religious principle which these Lights bring to view is the conviction that Judas' victory was achieved not by natural means, but through the direct interposition of Providence. The Rabbis attached great importance to the duty of reviving and fostering the historical consciousness of the nation. The Talmud records the legend. The Liturgy of the festival recites the historical facts. The ceremony of kindling the Lights—a memorial of ancient times—receives, at the hands of our wise men, the force of a divine commandment.

¹ An Address delivered on the first evening of the Feast of Lights, 1890, to the Afiké Jehudah Society in Prague.

Hence the form of its accompanying blessing: "Praised be thou, O Lord our God, who hast sanctified us with thy Commandments and *commanded us* to light the Chanukah Lights."

The Talmud (*Sabbath 23a*), after stating that Rav, the Head of the College of Sura, composed and *introduced this Benediction*, rightly enough asks, "Where has God commanded us?" The answers are as follows:—

"R. Avya says: 'The injunction to abide by the decision of the highest religious authorities applies not only to their interpretation of the law, but also to the innovations they introduced.'"

"R. Nechemya says: 'The institution of Chanukah Lights may be directly and specifically deduced from Scripture. For the Torah bids us note the events that befall our race and treasure them in our memories. Does it not say, Remember the days of old; consider the years of every generation; ask thy father, that he may tell thee, and thy elders that they declare unto thee?'" (Deut. xxxii. 7.)

But how else than through memorials can ancestors speak to their remote descendants?

In truth, no people possesses so many and such various historical monuments as the Jews. These are not works of art, in stone or bronze. Our national heroes were conscious that to their people the future belonged. They speak of "the last days" when, according to their prediction, all mankind would be saved. They, likewise, had a prevision that their race would be dispersed in all parts of the world. Therefore the Jewish memorials were closely interwoven with the Jewish life. History was embodied in institutions and observances. Not only are the Jewish feasts and fasts such memorials, but also a large, if not the largest portion of our ceremonial laws, including, in part, those relating to diet. Everything almost in Judaism is *אור*, Sign; *זכר*, Memorial; *זכרון*, Remembrance; *עדות*, Testimony.

In observing the life of a Jew, and his customs from the

beginning of the year to its end, you are reading a volume of hieroglyphics which contains the history of thousands of years.

The Psalmist, when rehearsing the past history of his people, gives clear expression to this idea: "What we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us, we will not hide from our children; showing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and the wonderful works that he hath done. For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children" (Ps. lxxviii. 3-6).

To one of these signs I purpose drawing your attention to-day, viz., the Sabbath. This monument of Jewish antiquity is covered with numerous inscriptions. First and foremost, the Sabbath is the day on which our forefathers are traditionally said to have entered into a holy covenant with God at the foot of Mount Sinai. Our oldest Rabbinical historical work, the *Seder Olam*, notes this fact, "The Decalogue was revealed on the sixth day of the third month; which, in that year, fell on a Sabbath." The Sabbath, then, was a sign that God had sanctified Israel. "Verily my Sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; *that ye may know that I am the Lord that doth sanctify you*" (Ex. xxxi. 13). The Fourth Commandment expresses, in its first sentence, the same idea. "Remember the Sabbath Day to sanctify it"—i.e., keep this day in mind as a day of sanctification. In the Book of Deuteronomy, where the Commandment is simply repeated, the phrase used is naturally, "Observe the Sabbath."

The Sabbath, being the seventh day of the week, and marking the conclusion of a period of time, is a sign that God created the world in six days. "It is a sign between

me and the children of Israel for ever : for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth." (Ex. xxxi. 17.)

Finally, the ordained day of rest commemorates Israel's redemption from Egyptian slavery. Special prominence is attached in Deuteronomy to this aspect of the Sabbath, "And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt" (Deut. v. 15).

This weekly festival is distinguished by a peculiar custom. At its arrival and departure lights are kindled and appropriate blessings recited. The custom is remarkable, if only in this respect, that husband and wife take equal part in its performance. On the eve of the Sabbath the wife kindles the lights, and praises God for having appointed the institution.² At the exit of the Sabbath, however, it is the husband's duty, as soon as he sees the flame of a fire or candle, to praise God for having created those artificial rays.

In the first blessing and the ceremony connected with it, the point of interest is not the blessing itself, but the circumstance that the duty of kindling the Friday evening Lights is relegated to the wife. The blessing may have been introduced by the women themselves. It is unknown to the ancient Rabbinical literature, being first mentioned in the Gaonic period, and its retention was, in a subsequent epoch, debated. What is the purpose of the Sabbath Lights? is a question that has been justly raised. The Karaites repudiate the institution; and, at one time, many of them used every Friday evening, as a practical protest, to sit in total darkness; a foolish practice which was gradually abandoned.

The second question that needs solution is, Why is it especially women's duty to kindle the Lights? The Talmudic reply to these queries is that the precept aims at

² Its extension, in course of time, to the other festivals forms a debatable topic among the later decisionists. Its discussion falls outside the scope of this address.

securing *שלום בית*—*domestic peace*. This phrase is usually explained in a utilitarian sense. Jews are forbidden to kindle fire on the Sabbath day. Unless, therefore, lights were lit before the Sabbath was ushered in, the harmony of the household might suffer. This rationalistic justification, however, can hardly be accepted by itself as sufficient. An entire chapter of the Mishnaic treatise, "Sabbath," the noted *Bameh-Madlikin*—the retention of which in the Liturgy has been the subject of so much controversy—is devoted to the discussion of this institution. Would it be hedged round with so many prescriptions and regulations if its object were nothing else than to secure household harmony? If this were indeed so, it would be a keen satire on later times, that an institution founded for the purpose of promoting peace, should indirectly have been a source of dissension.

Moreover, this view does not adequately explain the harsh threat of punishment which, according to a statement at the end of the chapter, will be meted out to those women who are negligent in the fulfilment of this duty.

Thus, the problem remains why this obligation was made especially incumbent on women. Surely it is the master's place to take measures to insure peace and quiet at home. The rationalistic school, that of Maimonides, for instance, readily replies that all household duties devolve upon the mistress.

A glance at the older Hagadists will convince us, however, that they did not look at this custom from so simple and narrow a point of view. Their pronouncement on the subject sounds somewhat mystical: "A woman it was who extinguished the light of life. Women, therefore, shall make atonement by kindling the Sabbath Lights." Reasons of this mystical character are poetical enough, but fail to satisfy the historian. A critical study of the style in which the Mishnah treats this custom proves that, at that time, it was already an ancient and firmly established institution, which the Rabbinical authorities only desired to

modify and regulate. The style of the Mishnah also makes it evident that it was not the ordinary household illumination, but a special Sabbath Lamp that formed the subject of discussion. This is also a just inference from the turn of the phrase להדליק נר של שבת.

These considerations will guide us to a right conclusion if only we consider the manner in which customs originate and spread. Of course, every custom has its own history and development. Nevertheless, the following may be accepted as generally applicable.

Many customs are nothing else than ghosts of obsolete prescriptions. When a nation changes its religious conceptions and gives up the institutions connected with its old cast-off beliefs, these institutions are apt to reappear in a new dress, adapt themselves to the new religious constitution, and survive as customs. Women especially display a conservative tendency in clinging to these old usages. Of many examples which might be given one must here suffice.

On New Moons it was, and in many congregations still is, the custom for women to abstain from work. It is clear, from several passages in the Bible, that, in the days of the Prophets, the New Moon was regarded by the people as a festival like the Sabbath. The Mosaic legislation, however does not include it in the list of festivals named in Leviticus. It is, however, mentioned in the Book of Numbers as a day on which a special offering was to be brought. The Mosaic Code, indeed, besides the seventh day of the week, instituted only seven other annual holidays. We are justified in assuming that the feast of the New Moon had maintained itself among the people as a heritage from pre-Mosaic times. At a subsequent period the custom of abstaining from work on this day died out, and the women's conservative instinct alone preserved a memorial of it. The origin of the Sabbath Lights may be somewhat similar. That the Sabbath itself is a pre-Mosaic institution is expressly declared in Holy Writ. After the

Sinaitic revelation, the precepts in connection with its celebration were inculcated anew, and the Sabbath was appointed a sign of the covenant between God and his people. The Midrashim contain many traditional legends in which the patriarchs figure as Sabbath observers. This, at least, is certain that the division of time into periods of seven days is very ancient.

If, therefore, it be granted that the legendary reason quoted above has an historical foundation, why should we not further assume that fires were kindled and maintained, as a religious rite, from week to week, and that the Sabbath Lights are a relic of this ancient usage. This inference is not a mere hypothesis. It is supported by an Hagadic legend. Among the pious works of our ancestress, Sarah, it is mentioned (*Bereshit Rabba*, c. 60) that she kept a lamp burning from Friday evening to Friday evening. It will naturally be asked, Why should the eve of the last day of the week have been selected as the time for kindling the weekly light? In order to answer this query we must refer to another mode in which customs originate. Every nation forms its own conceptions of the creation of the universe and of its development in the course of ages. The more youthful a race is, and the richer its imagination, the more poetical will these conceptions be. Their embodiment in suitable forms will find an echo in every heart. The phrase sometimes heard, "*Es ist mir wie von der Seele*," "it seems to come from my heart"—is nothing else but an admission that a form of embodying a popular conception has found universal acceptance.

Thus, too, a nation's poetry becomes embodied in general customs. When the poetry becomes extinct, the customs drearily drag along for a time, but finally perish, unless some fresh circumstance gives them new life. Happily the poetical idea represented in the Friday Evening Lights has been preserved in its pristine lustre. The Hagadah tells us that when God created the original light on the first day, he resolved to lay it up in his treasures for the

delectation of the saints. It was, therefore, withdrawn on the fourth day when sun, moon, and stars were created. On the sixth day, however, when "God saw all that he had made, and lo! it was very good," he illuminated the young world for thirty-six hours continuously with the dazzling rays of this primal light. On Friday evening, the angels, forming themselves into choirs, sang hymns at the dedication of the world. The Hagadist, R. Levi, with deep insight, points out that while the sentence, "It was evening and it was morning," concludes the history of each day of the Creation, the seventh day is excepted, because no evening had preceded it.

The history of the Creation closes with the words, **ויכלו** **ויכל** **אלהים** and **השמים והארץ**. These are ordinarily translated "The heavens and earth were finished," "and God finished," in agreement with the rendering of the Jerusalem Targum. Onkelos and the Pesikta, however, understood the first phrase in a different sense. **ויכל**, Onkelos renders, indeed, **ושיצי**, "he finished," but **ואשתכללו** is given as the equivalent of **ויכלו**. The Pesikta, in harmony with this rendering, expressly remarks **אין ויכלו אלא לשון הנוכה**. They evidently derived **ויכולו** from the root **כלל**, to adorn, to crown; whence the noun **כלה**, "crowned, adorned one," "bride." On the eve of the Sabbath, man's first day, the youthful world, arrayed like a bride, was given to Adam, its future ruler and possessor. This is the reason why the Synagogue, at the present day, greets the Sabbath by the title **כלה**, bride. So the world's illumination and consecration have left a memorial behind them in the Jewish custom of lighting a lamp at the approach of the Sabbath.

In the performance of this festive and religious rite, honour is conferred upon woman. This feature of the custom throws a flood of light upon the position assigned to women by Judaism.

When the Creation was completed, Scripture says, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was

very good." This judgment was pronounced after Eve—the last work in God's Creation—was called into being. For the love of wife—the foundation of family life—constituted the keystone of the world. When Eve was created, God could declare that his work was good.

Before a helpmeet was given to the first man, God said, *לא טוב האדם הייח לבדו*—"It is not good that man should be alone." This does not mean that solitude is disadvantageous to a human being. That would have been expressed as follows: *לא טוב לאדם להיח לבדו*. The idea intended to be conveyed is rather that the propagation of the human race without wedlock—as in the case of the brutes—would have been intrinsically bad. So the Talmud understands this text. The phrase, "It is not good," has here a moral as well as a physical application. The optimistic Scriptural doctrine undoubtedly places marriage in the first rank of its institutions. A glance at the opposite system will make the reason at once apparent. Since Schoopenhauer's day, Pessimism has, in its various branches, notoriously gained wide acceptance. The theory, however, is nothing new. Maimonides already devoted several chapters to a refutation of Alrasi, who had written a bulky volume to demonstrate the preponderance of evil over good in human life. The doctrine is of still earlier date; we meet with it in Scripture. Those who fixed the Biblical Canon have left us an instructive work on the subject. This work is called *Koheleth*. In it the most opposed views are advanced, and a pessimist is also allowed to unfold his opinions. But, by a fine touch, the latter is represented as a misogynist who expresses in the strongest terms his aversion to, and contempt for, the gentler sex. Though he despises the world, he is, at the same time, a Sybarite who indulges himself in luxuries, possesses men-servants and women-servants, male singers and female singers; and, in short, obtains everything that human heart can desire. Yet, all his possessions, he says, are worthless. They fail to make existence pleasurable.

What our philosopher, however, lacks, is a faithful wife and loving children. He, indeed, would not care for them. He dislikes the thought of leaving his hard-won riches to an heir of whom he does not know whether he will turn out a wise man or a fool. Do not all these touches call to mind the modern teacher of Pessimism. But what wonder! To a man who only lives for himself life loses its flavour. Such a man has no hold on existence. "It is not good that man should live alone," is the author of Koheleth's rejoinder to the pessimist. "Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of thy vain life."¹ A child's prattle and an infant's smile make the mother forget her pain, and the father his cares; and both parents find the world good indeed. The Psalmist glorifies God in his creation, and man he exalts as but little lower than the God who crowned him with honour and glory and put all things under his feet. Knowing full well, however, how God is blasphemed, and the joys of life are poisoned, the inspired singer introduces at the beginning of his psalm a verse which at first seems to bear no relation to the whole: "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength against thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger." The prattle of the little ones is able to disarm an enemy who seeks vengeance, and to stop his design. So wondrously is man formed.

As for the evils that afflict the human race, most of them, Maimonides thinks, we bring upon ourselves. If society generally, and its members individually, were to order their affairs upon a reasonable and moral basis, the large majority of evils would disappear. The residue, caused by physical circumstances, would also, for the most part be overcome.

If, however, we seek for the ultimate source of most evils, we shall find it in the boundless desire —innate in man

¹ Eccles. ix. 9.

—to assert his authority over all things on earth. The wise limitation of this impulse, and its direction into right channels, are the prerogatives of domestic affection.

A Hagadist once uttered a sentiment which has become a proverb, "Everything comes from the woman." The French Jurist's well-known *mot*, "*Cherchez la femme*," sounds somewhat similar. But while the Gallican lawyer only looks for the woman when investigating crime, the Jewish Rabbi ascribes all virtues to her influence, and illustrates his statement by examples drawn from his personal observations. A pious couple, he tells us, had lived together for a period of ten years. As their union had not been blessed with children, they agreed to separate. Both married again. But while the man's second marriage demoralised and degraded him, the woman, who had married a bad man, improved him, and raised him to her level. The strength of woman's influence could hardly have been better exemplified than in this slight narrative. The Palestinian Targum expresses a similar idea in its paraphrase of the text, "and he shall rule over thee," which ought rather to be rendered "in or by thee": "Through thee—the wife—he shall have the power to become virtuous or vicious." The mystic's saying has a profound meaning: "Woman can quench the light of life; on her, therefore, the mother of the household, falls the duty of kindling the Sabbath Lights. In the story of the Creation man occupies a middle place between the brutes and woman. Whether he is to be lifted up out of the ranks of the bestial world, or whether he is to be thrust back into it, depends entirely upon her. After the creation of woman came the Sabbath, when the young world was consecrated amidst celestial choruses and festive illuminations. Of this consecration the wife's Sabbath Lights are a memorial. The *בית שלום* of the Rabbis does not mean merely domestic quiet. It has a wider significance. It is intended to express the prosperity and well-being of the household in the fullest sense of the phrase.

Beautiful is the idyllic poem in which the Psalmist

describes such a happy home : "Blessed is every one that feareth the Lord, that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands : happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee. Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house : thy children, like olive plants, round about thy table. Behold, that thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the Lord."

The vine needs the support of a stouter stock ; produces, however, fruit whose juice revives and exhilarates. So the wife clings to her husband, and cheers him with her love.

The Sabbath rest is over, and, again, we hear a blessing pronounced over the lights. This time, however, it is the father who officiates as he returns to his weekly labour, refreshed and strengthened, physically and spiritually, by the Sabbath rest. It is significant that our ancient teachers call the week *ששת ימי המעשה*. The period of labour and production, has recommenced.

When, at the building of the Tabernacle, Moses forbade work on the Sabbath, he used a remarkable phrase to express cessation from labour : "Ye shall not kindle fire in all your dwelling-houses on the Sabbath day."

Fire is a symbol of human activity—a mark of civilisation. The use of fire raises man above the brutes, none of whom employ it. With its aid he prepares his food, smelts ore, shapes metal instruments for all purposes. But with the use of fire new wants arose ; the eager pursuit of gold and silver commenced. The desire of advancing from discovery to discovery and increasing his wealth began to rage in man's heart.

If the gratification of avarice were our highest aim, then, truly, fire would have proved but a doubtful friend. For the appetite for possessions is never satisfied ; it only grows by what it feeds on, and the acquisition of wealth is the source of envy and peril. Filled with pessimistic thoughts man surveys the net results of his progress, which, alas ! far from satisfying him, prick and fret him. Shall he then, tear himself away from civilisation,

abandon his conquests, and return to the primæval state of nature? This he cannot do. He is chained, so to speak, to the car of progress. This dissatisfaction with his environment—a result of civilisation—has been allegorised in a Greek myth—the well-known legend of Prometheus. Prometheus stole fire from Zeus, and secretly gave it to men. By its aid he taught them arts and sciences. Zeus then sent mankind Pandora, the bringer of misfortune. Prometheus was chained to a rock and an eagle gnawed his liver, which, however, grew again overnight.

According to another legend, it was the goddess Hestia who first taught men the use of fire for domestic purposes. The passage leading to the house, where the hearth usually was placed, was therefore dedicated to her. It is noteworthy that the uses of fire in the kitchen and workshop are here put in the foreground.

Has the genius of Judaism preserved any reminiscence or memorial of the origin of fire?

There is an express law that fire should be continually maintained on the altar. Sacrifices, it seems, had originally no other object than the maintenance of fire by the combustion of fat and fuel of a similar character. Scripture terms sacrifices *לחם אש* “Bread of fire,” and *לחמי לאשי* “My bread for my fire.” That Judaism regarded this element as an essentially beneficent agency, a divine gift that increases life and vigour, while in its destructive force it only saw a condemnation of its abuse by man, is indicated in the story of the Burning Bush that was not consumed. This was Moses’ initiation into his sacred mission. He was to give Israel a religion which was to render them free and happy; a heavenly flame which was to illuminate, but not destroy.

The German poet sang :

“ Wohlthätig ist des Feuers Macht
Wenn sie der Mensch bezähmt, bewacht.
Und was er bildet, was er schafft
Das dankt er dieser Himmelskraft.”

From the standpoint of Judaism, one might rather say that the power of fire is beneficent only when man conquers and guards *himself*. But how did man, according to the Hagadah, obtain this divine boon? This we are told in the sequel to the story—already referred to—concerning the illumination of the world on the first Sabbath. For when at the close of day the earth was wrapped in darkness, Adam's mind was filled with alarm. He feared that the darkness which had set in was to be perpetual. The Almighty took pity on him, and endowed him with a divine intuition. Adam took two stones, beat them against each other, and so discovered fire. In another version these stones are given names. One was the "Stone of Darkness," the other the "Shadow of Death." Both were taken from Hell. These names are borrowed from that part of the Book of Job where the discovery of fire is prominently mentioned in the description of human progress. The poet who wrote the book says, "Surely there is a vein for the silver and a place for gold where they fine it. Iron is taken out of the earth, and brass is molten out of the stone. He setteth an end to darkness, and searcheth out all perfection: the *stones of darkness* and the *shadow of death*." Another legend says that God sent to Adam a pillar of fire, from which he was able to derive means of kindling a flame. All these versions conclude in the same fashion. When Adam saw the artificial light he recited a blessing to the Creator of rays of fire, *בורא מאורי האש*. The illuminating power of fire is in these legends dwelt upon as its most valuable function. To the Jewish mind the highest advantage derived from its use is its power of dissipating darkness. We have already noted that it was the fire of the Lamp which Sarah, the mother of the Chosen People, tended, and not that of the Hearth. It deserves also to be noticed that fire, in the Jewish account, is God's gift to man. Man had no need to steal it. Fire, as a source of light, cannot bring evil. That detail of the legend which makes hell the quarry whence the stones were taken out of which

fire was struck is also of deep significance. By his divine reason man can overcome evil, and turn it into good.

If it has been allotted to woman to give the home the religious sanctity of the Sabbath, and remind the family of the celestial light of Creation, it was made man's duty, at the expiration of the Day of Rest, when he is about to return to his weekly work, to recall the origin of artificial fire through which humanity has attained its high rank in the order of Creation. Has he made a proper use of this divine gift? He looks at his hands; nothing unworthy clings to them; they are clean, and he praises the Almighty who created the rays of light, *בורא מאורי האש*.

Light is thus the appointed memorial of remote antiquity. The last historical feast instituted by our ancestors is also a Feast of Lights. So may man ever walk on in light, to whom the first words of God were, "Let there be light."

M. FRIEDMANN.
